

VZCZCXRO2303
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHRH #0499 0710927
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 120927Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4646
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 8445
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000499

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/11/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL SCUL SA

SUBJECT: MINIMAL CONTROVERSY REIGNS AT RIYADH BOOK FAIR

REF: 2006 RIYADH 7447

Classified By: Political Counselor David Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) The Ministry of Culture and Information held its third annual book fair in Riyadh March 2 to March 9. Over 400 vendors had their publications available for sale, and topics included children's literature, history, fiction, and religion. The book fair had family hours each morning, abandoning its traditional posture as a "male only" event. However, when PolOff visited during a "male only" time, there were families present and no religious police appeared to be present. The fair opened with an inaugural ceremony and speeches by leaders in the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Ministry of Education, and the United Nations. Many Saudi authors -- both male and female -- staged themselves for the duration of the event in one of the tents in order to be available for periodic book signings and readings.

¶2. (C) Last year, the fair sparked considerable controversy when the novel "Girls of Riyadh," which was published September 2005 in Lebanon, was featured. Many religious conservatives criticized the book -- and later sued the author in the Court of Grievances -- saying that it promoted immoral behavior among women. The Ministry of Culture drew significant criticism for allowing the fair to showcase the book, but defended that decision on the basis that the novel exemplified the talent among female Saudi authors and did not violate any laws (reftel).

¶3. (C) An official from the Ministry of Culture told PolOff on March 4 that in order to avoid similar controversy while displaying even more books than last year -- including the "Girls of Riyadh" -- the Minister of Culture engaged in a robust public relations campaign prior to the launch of the book fair. He said that Minister Iyad bin Ameen Madani gave many media interviews stating that the purpose of the book fair was to promote culture, education, and the arts in Saudi Arabia. Madani also conveyed that if there was disagreement with the book choices made by the Ministry of Culture and Information, individuals should register their complaints with the Ministry directly. The official further told PolOff that all books are reviewed and approved by a committee in the Ministry of Culture before being displayed at the book fair. He said that the only books banned from the book fair were those containing pictures that could be perceived as 'pornographic' and any books criticizing King Abdullah and the ruling Al Saud family. He did say, however, that publications criticizing the ministries, including the Ministry of Culture, were permissible. When asked about hate speech and violence, the official stated that, to date, there are no specific regulations about banning such references. He said that "if books are published about Islam, then by their very nature, they preach peace and tolerance, not intolerance and hate."

¶4. (U) Overall, the book fair received positive publicity in the media and there were no reported incidents at the event itself. However, eighteen self-proclaimed religious scholars issued a statement on March 5 on the conservative Internet website Noor al-Islam criticizing the books displayed at the fair. According to their statement, the books were blasphemous and were not cleared by the Ministry of Culture and Information because they were printed abroad. (Note: According to a statement by the Ministry of Culture after the book fair, it was possible that some books might have been on display illegally. The Ministry promised to ensure that this does not happen next year. However, the Ministry clears all books officially on display irrespective of where they were printed or published. End Note.) The signatories are not known scholars, and they did not submit this statement directly to the Ministry.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The increased presence of families at the book fair and the reissuance of the "Girls of Riyadh" novel are indicators of the slow but continuing trend to challenge the religious conservatives in the Kingdom. Especially notable was the lack of controversy in the media -- a forum ripe for robust debate, especially on such 'soft' topics. The success of these small steps pave the way for larger reform efforts that are part of King Abdullah's agenda. END COMMENT.

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